

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 23, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250

Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to you today out of great concern for the ability of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, Department) to continue fulfilling its important mission of supporting farmers, ranchers, and rural America due to President Biden's vaccine mandate for federal employees and the onerous and inflexible approach that you have taken in administering this mandate at USDA.

As members of the House Agriculture Committee, we have had the fortune to interact with USDA officials at all levels. These individuals are consummate professionals and dedicated civil servants who take pride in the mission of the Department.

Unfortunately, we hear widespread stories of the stress this has placed on Department employees, the challenges that USDA is having in retaining these capable workers, and the inability of the federal hiring process to keep up with attrition. Therefore, we are gravely concerned that the vaccine mandate will exacerbate these issues and render the Department incapacitated across multiple agencies and in certain areas of the country.

To help us better understand the scope and impact of this mandate as well as any contingency plans USDA has as this issue evolves, we request written responses to the following questions:

1. Does USDA have an estimate of the vaccination status of its employees? Please provide both the number and percentage of employees that are not fully vaccinated broken out across all agencies at the Department.
2. Within each agency, please provide the number and percentage of employees not fully vaccinated broken out by state.
3. Is USDA aware of any Department field offices, including FSA county offices, not containing at least one fully vaccinated employee?
4. If there are any Department field offices, including FSA county offices, without fully vaccinated employees, how will USDA staff such office or service producers in that county after November 22?

5. Why did USDA deny the petition from the National Association of FSA County Office Employees (NASCOE) to allow for required testing in lieu of vaccination as was allowed under the OSHA emergency temporary standard (ETS) published on November 5, 2021?
6. Was USDA required by law to extend the vaccine mandate to state technical committee (STC) and county office committee (CoC) members or was this a policy decision made by USDA? Please provide either the legal justification or policy rationale for this requirement.
7. Given the ongoing challenges the Forest Service faces with firefighting and staff retention, will any exceptions be made for wildland firefighters or other employees who predominantly work outdoors?
8. With increased funding in the recent infrastructure package for the Forest Service, how is the agency planning to ensure adequate staffing to carry out the greater workload?
9. Given federally inspected meat and poultry processing establishments cannot operate without USDA inspection, what is USDA's plan to ensure the availability of inspectors at these establishments without further compounding the current inspector shortage and inadvertently contributing to supply chain disruptions?
10. How many applications for religious or medical exemptions has USDA received and what are their status (i.e., approved, denied, or pending)?
11. Numerous medical studies have found that natural immunity is at least as effective, if not more effective, than vaccine-induced immunity. Was any consideration given to allowing an exemption to the vaccine mandate for those employees previously infected by COVID-19? If so, why did USDA ultimately decide to ignore the science? Please provide any and all justifications for this final decision.
12. What disciplinary measures will USDA take against employees who are not fully vaccinated and what is the timeline for implementing such measures? Will these measures differ between staff, agency, department, etc.?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. We look forward to receiving a response no later than close of business on November 30, 2021.

Sincerely,



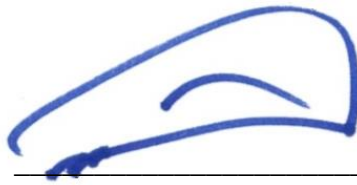
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Republican Leader
House Committee on Agriculture



Representative Austin Scott (GA-08)



Representative Rick Crawford (AR-01)



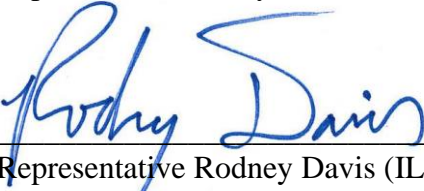
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Representative Vicky Hartzler (MO-04)



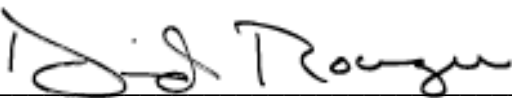
Representative Doug LaMalfa (CA-01)



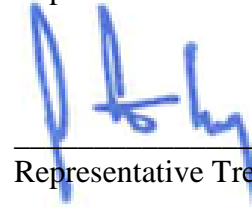
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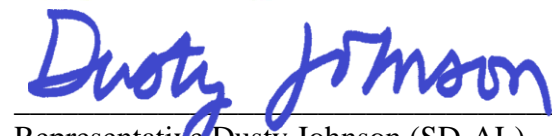
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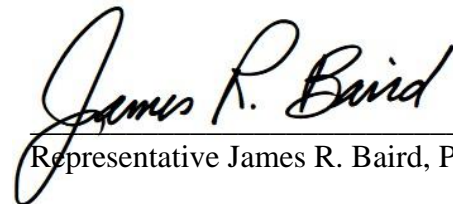
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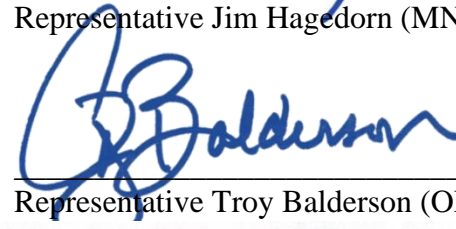
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Representative Jim Hagedorn (MN-01)



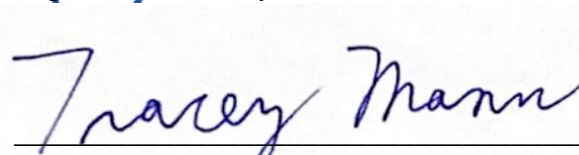
Representative Chris Jacobs (NY-27)



Representative Troy Balderson (OH-12)



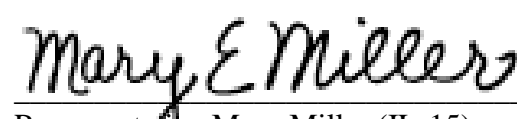
Representative Michael Cloud (TX-27)



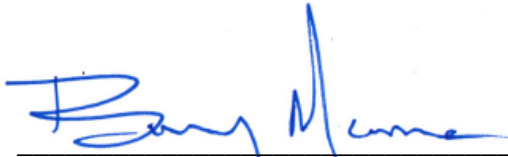
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